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MULTIPLE DISADVANTAGES?

The integration of refugee women on the Swedish labour market

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Abstract

Despite generally high levels of female employment and an extensive provision of gender-specific institutions, refugee women still hold a marginalized position on the Swedish labour market. While there already exists a great deal of research covering the broader area of immigrant's labour market integration, less is known about the specific needs and prerequisites of different subgroups within this heterogeneous population. Most previous research has also been of quantitative nature, focusing on the relationship between measurable labour market outcomes and discrete characteristics of the host country, source country, or individual immigrant. In order to contribute to the existing research, this study address the hindrances refugee women face when seeking to enter and establish themselves on the Swedish labour market from a qualitative and intersectional perspective. Through the method of in-depth interviewing, it explores what refugee women's own accounts of their labour market integration process can tell us about the key factors impeding a successful labour market integration. A lack of sufficient institutional support was found to be the most central factor, as it appeared to have an amplifying effect also on labour market obstacles identified on the individual and structural level. Furthermore, the intersectional approach helped illustrate how gender played an important role in shaping the integration process, but often in more subtle and indirect manners than what has been assumed by the cultural explanations put forward in previous research.

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List of abbreviations

LFPR- Labour Force Participation Rate

MIPEX: Migrant Integration Policy Index

OECD- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PES - The Swedish Public Employment Service

SAS – Swedish as a second language

SFI – Swedish for immigrants

ULV Programme - Complementary education for foreign teachers

1. Introduction

For many years, Sweden has been top-ranked in the OECD-statistics for female employment (OECD, 2018) and is a country well-known for its women- friendly policies (Hernes, 1987; Borchorst and Siim, 2002). Historically, the coupling of paid work and women's liberation has been a central feature of Swedish gender equality policy (Larsson, 2015; Calleman, 2014) and the development of gender-specific institutions such as individualized taxation schemes, paid parental leave and subsidized childcare facilities has created favorable conditions for women to both enter and stay on the labour market (Neuman, 2014). However, when looking at the situation of foreign-born women a more unsettling picture appears. Employment rates illustrate large gaps between native and foreign-born women, as well as significant gender gaps within the foreign-born population (Statistics Sweden, 2017; Wickström Östervall, 2017).

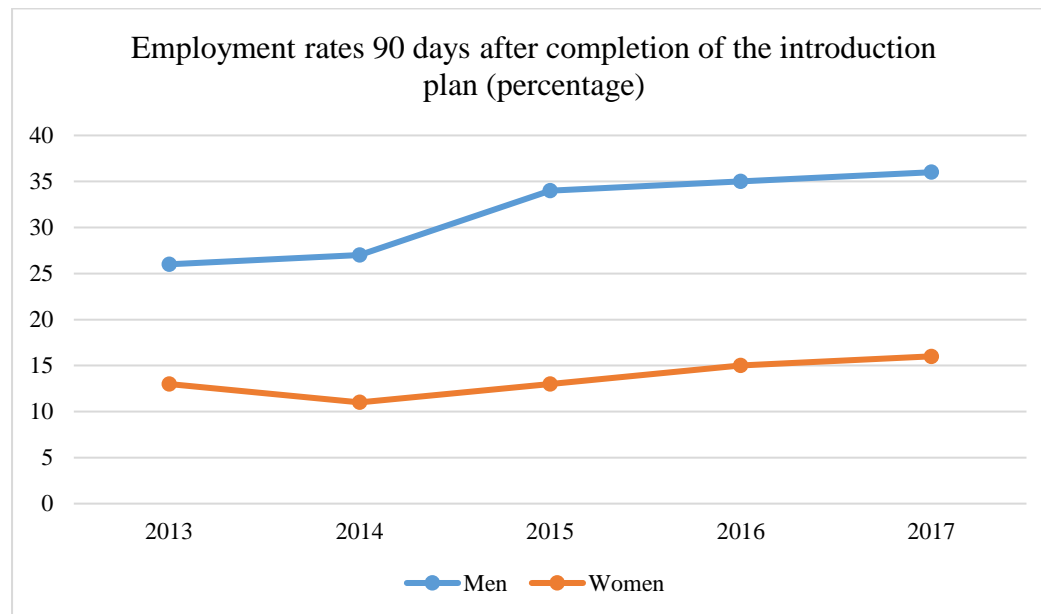
Even though a persistent employment gap between native and foreign-born women can be traced back as far as to the late 1970s (Belevander, 2005), the poor labour market integration of female immigrants has become a more salient issue since immigration to Sweden in the last decades has been increasingly characterized by large-scale asylum and family migration from non-EU countries, as refugees and their family members constitute the group that generally finds it most difficult to get a foothold on the labour market (Borevi, 2014; SOU 2012:69). Consequently, when the Swedish government in 2007 commissioned a special inquiry to review the current integration policy and give proposals on a new system for immigrant introduction, the directive specifically emphasized the importance of applying a gender equality perspective (Government Directive 2007:52). Three years later, in 2010, the so-called Establishment Reform (Law 2010:197) came into force and responsibility for the introduction of newly arrived immigrants¹ was transferred from the municipalities to the central government, more specifically the Swedish Public Employment Service (PES), with the intention to provide a more uniform and work-oriented introduction across the country (Government Bill 2009:10/60).

While annual evaluations of the introduction programme demonstrate steadily increasing employment rates, this positive development has almost exclusively been driven by the fact

¹ The Establishment Reform (Law 2010:197) covered all immigrants who had been granted permanent residence either as refugees or individuals eligible for subsidiary protection, and also dependents of refugees and individuals eligible for subsidiary protection who had applied for residence within two years after the sponsor had been received by a Swedish municipally.

that more men proceed to employment after having completed the two-year long introduction plan (Wickström and Östervall, 2017, figure 1). This persistent gender gap and the marginalized labour market position of many refugee women poses a critical challenge for Swedish integration policy and constitutes the empirical point of departure for this thesis.

Figure 1. Employment rates 90 days after completion of the two-year introduction plan (PES, annual reports 2013 – 2017).



1.1 Problem formulation and research question

In light of the rapidly increased influx of asylum seekers in Europe, the issue of integration has in recent years become a prioritized issue on the political agenda of the European Union, and to bring refugee women into employment in the host societies is emphasized as constituting a particularly crucial challenge (European Commission and OECD, 2016; Sansonetti 2016).

From a scientific perspective, there already exists a large amount of research covering the broader area of immigrant's labour market integration, but less is known about the specific needs and prerequisites of different subgroup within this heterogeneous population (Lönnroos and Gustafsson). Hence, despite increased political attention, there is still a relative dearth of studies specifically addressing the labour market integration of refugee women. The research available primarily consists of register data that compares the labour market outcomes of refugee women and other migrant groups or the native population, while controlling for factors

such as educational level and source country.² Also when looking at the wider field of labour market integration research, focus has primarily been directed towards examining the causal relationships between measurable labour market outcomes, such as employment or labour force participation rates, and discrete characteristics of the host country, source country or individual immigrant (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore, 2017; Tastsoglou and Preston, 2005).

While these quantitative studies have helped identify several obstacles to refugee women's labour market integration, the focus on single factors simultaneously fails to explore the interlinkages and relative weight of different labour market obstacles if seen from a systemic perspective, consequently making it difficult to assess what policy efforts would be most effective for improving the prospects of a successful labour market integration. In order to contribute to existing research, this thesis will therefore through the method of in-depth interviewing address refugee women's integration on the Swedish labour market from a qualitative and intersectional perspective. By conceptualizing labour market integration not only as a measurable outcome, but as a process involving different challenges that may vary in their significance for different women³ - depending on the autonomous and intersecting effects of gender, ethnicity, class and age - the aim is to generate new insights about the key underlying causes that impede refugee women's labour market integration.

From a policy perspective, most scholarly accounts of the efforts made by governments to promote labour market integration have tended to focus on examining the design and underpinning logic of specific policies and programmes⁴, without including the perceptions of immigrants themselves (Bucken-Knapp, Fakihi and Spehar, 2018). I would argue that focusing on the voices of refugee women allows a more nuanced understanding of the functioning of institutional systems for labour market integration, and the effects they have on those taking part in them. While not claiming that refugee women's subjective perspectives should be the sole form of data to be considered, I would still argue that their voices are a particularly overlooked source of data when it comes to gaining increased analytical leverage on the

² See for example Bakker, Dagevos, and Engbersen 2017; Bratsberg, Raaum, and Røed 2014; Alder et. al 2017.

³ Paraphrasing Tastsoglou and Preston's (2005:48) call for a re-conceptualization of economic and labour market integration "not only as an outcome that refers to access to employment, income, and work commensurate with one's qualifications, but, primarily, as a process involving various challenges that have different relevance for different women".

⁴ See for example Emilsson, 2015; Valenta and Bunar, 2010; Diedrich et.al., 2011.

interlinkages of the institutional systems for labour market integration and the individual characteristics of refugee women.

To summarize, this thesis seeks to contribute to both policy and scholarship by (1) expanding our knowledge about the underlying causes for refugee women's poor labour market integration, and (2) giving voice to refugee women's subjective knowledge of the process of labour market integration, a perspective which has often been absent in previous research.

Research question:

- What can refugee women's accounts of their labour market integration process tell us about the key factors impeding a successful labour market integration?

1.2 Outline and clarifications

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows: the first section introduces previous research covering the area of immigrant's labour market integration from both a general and gender-specific perspective. Thereafter, the analytical framework of intersectionality is presented, followed by a description of methods. Analytical findings and conclusions drawn from the collected data are presented and discussed in section five and six. Lastly, the final section reflects upon policy implications and directions for future research.

Before proceeding with the literature review, a few concepts that will be used in this thesis needs to be clarified. The specified target population for this study is non-European women who have been granted residence permits in Sweden either as refugees, individuals eligible for subsidiary protection, or dependents of refugees and individuals eligible for subsidiary protection, thereby being eligible to participate in the introduction programme for newly arrived immigrants. This population will hereafter be referred to as "female refugees". Other definitions such as "immigrant women", "foreign-born women", "non-European women", "migrant women" and "newly/recently arrived women" are sometimes used when recapitulating findings from previous research or when referring to statistical sources. For Swedish register data, individuals count as newly arrived during the time period when they participate in the introduction programme, usually for two years. However, in some of the other materials referred to in this thesis the time frame varies, and newly arrived can refer to individuals that have resided in the host country for up to five years.

Further, it is important to clarify the relation between labour force participation and employment. The labour force consists of those who want to work, i.e. both those who are employed and those who are unemployed but seeking work. Hence, labour force participation rates refer to the share of the working age population that is available for work, while employment rates are expressed as the number of employed and unemployed in relation to the labour force. Sick-listed, retired, full-time students and people who would be able to work but who are not seeking employment (latent jobseekers) count as being outside of the labour force. (Statistics Sweden: Concepts and definitions LFS). In this thesis, the broader term “labour market integration” refers to finding a secure employment on the Swedish labour market.

2. Literature review

Previous research has put forward a number of explanations for the lower labour market participation of immigrants in general, and female refugees in particular. Roughly, these explanations can be divided into structural, institutional and individual barriers for labour market integration (Sansonetti, 2016). Structural barriers refer to the host country’s overall labour market structure and the prevalence of employer discrimination. Institutional barriers refer to host country policies and legislation that may have an impact on the conditions for labour market integration, including general welfare model and the provision of gender-specific institutions, integration policies and systems for recognition of foreign credentials. Lastly, individual barriers involve educational level, language proficiency, access to social and professional networks and cultural values regarding female labour force participation. It should be stressed that despite being theoretically separated, the boundaries between these levels are in reality not always as clear-cut. Cultural values, for example, can be understood as an individual as well as structural barrier, in the sense that it may refer to an individual’s attitude towards engaging in paid labour, but simultaneously to an informal institution shaping the individual’s actions.

2.1. Structural barriers

Labour market structure

Characteristics of the host country’s labour market, including skill demands, the share of low-skill employment and employment protection legislation, have proven decisive for the labour market integration of both male and female immigrants (Reyneri and Fullin, 2011; Kogan,

2007; OECD, 2016). In a comparative study of six European countries, Reyneri and Fulling (2011) illustrate how countries with a labour demand geared towards high skill occupations also tend to request country-specific competencies and a high language proficiency, thus creating significant labour market barriers for all immigrants, regardless of educational and professional background. Also, Kogan (2007) claims that a strict employment protection legislation, which imposes high costs for hiring and firing on the employer, can make employers less inclined to hire immigrants due to insecurities regarding their qualifications and productivity.

From a Swedish perspective, Bevelander's (2005) study of immigrant women's labour market integration between 1970 and 1995 indicates that the structural shift from an industrial to a service based economic sector, alongside organizational and technical changes, created significant barriers for immigrant women to enter the labour market. Without lowering the requirements for formal skills and education, these shifts increased the importance of informal skills, such as intrapersonal competence, language proficiency and culture-specific knowledge, thus creating higher entry barriers for women from countries perceived to be linguistically and culturally distant from Sweden (Bevelander, 2005). Today, the Swedish economy is characterized by a knowledge-intense production with high demands for skill. Few jobs require less than an upper-secondary education and the share of low-skill employment is the lowest in the EU (Eriksson, Hensvik and Skans, 2017; OECD, 2016). Combined with a low wage dispersion and a strict employment protection legislation, the barriers for labour market entry are generally high.

Discrimination

Besides general labour market characteristics, discrimination is another structural barrier with a bearing on immigrants' labour market integration. Underlying motives for employment discrimination can vary and are often difficult to uncover in empirical research, but in theory a distinction is usually made between preference-based and statistical discrimination.⁵

Ethnic discrimination as an explanation for socioeconomic inequalities between native and foreign-born groups is controversial, primarily due to the difficulties associated with identifying and measuring the prevalence of discriminatory practices (Arai, Bursell and Nekby,

⁵ The former referring to when the employer holds negative preferences towards a certain group, and the latter to when the employer holds stereotypical beliefs about the productively-related characteristics of a certain group (Carlsson and Rooth, 2007)

2016). However, field experiments have been put forward as a suitable method for determining the causal links between ethnicity and labour market outcomes and they often involve applying for actual jobs using fictitious resumes that only vary with respect to cues of ethnicity, for example the name of the applicant (Riach and Rich, 2002; Arai, Bursell and Nekby, 2016). These types of experimental studies have consistently exposed relatively high levels of unequal treatment of ethnic and racial minorities in a large number of countries, including Sweden.⁶

From a gender perspective, it has often been assumed that being a minority woman involves a “double-burden”, considering that both women and ethnic minorities generally face discriminatory practices on the labour market (e.g. Browne and Misra, 2003; Sansonetti, 2016). Although this assumption has a strong intuitive appeal, the relatively few field experiments including both men and women have conversely indicated that minority men face stronger discrimination than minority women (Arai, Bursell and Nekby, 2016; Sidanius and Veniegas, 2000). When Arai, Bursell and Nekby (2016) examined the intensity of employer stereotypes of people with Arabic names in Sweden, they found a “reverse gender gap”, as men proved to be more strongly discriminated against than women. In their experimental setup, employers were first sent resumes of equal quality with Swedish or Arabic names. Thereafter, more relevant professional experience was added to the Arabic-named resumes compared to the Swedish-named. The results demonstrated that when Arabic-named resumes were enhanced, initial differences in call-backs disappeared for female applicants, but remained strong and significant for male applicants. One possible explanation for this outcome, that the authors suggest, may be that employer stereotypes of people with Arabic backgrounds to a large extent reflect traditional gender stereotypes that place women in domestic and caring roles. Consequently, an Arabic woman with a strong resume may be perceived by employers as deviating from this domestic stereotype, signaling a higher labour-market productivity since she has managed to successfully “break free” from the traditional role ascribed to her (Arai, Bursell and Nekby, 2016). Hence, while ethnic discrimination has been proven to exist on the Swedish labour market, it does not necessarily affect minority women to any greater extent than minority men.

2.2 Institutional barriers

⁶ See for example Riach and Rich, 2002 ;Carlsson and Rooth, 2007; Bursell, 2014.

Welfare model and gender-specific institutions

The host country's general welfare model and the provision of gender-specific institutions has been put forward as two important institutional factors with a bearing on the labour market integration of immigrant women (Kesler, 2006; Jaumotte, 2003). In a comparative study of social policy and immigrant joblessness in Sweden, Germany and Britain, Kesler (2006) concludes that Sweden stands out among the three countries both regarding immigrants' access to welfare transfers and the existence of policies for promoting women's employment. Sweden's high levels of income redistribution and the small gap in welfare rights between immigrants and natives, Kesler suggests, could depress the employment rates among immigrants as they are less forced into employment.⁷ Koopmans' (2010) comparative policy analysis of six European countries, including Sweden, likewise found that the combination of a strong welfare state and policies that grant immigrants an easy access to equal rights as natives produces poor integration outcomes. The possibly disincentivizing effect of Sweden's generous and universal welfare model has also been emphasized in previous government bills and reports on immigrant integration policy (e.g. Government Bill 1997/98:16; SOU 2008:58).

From a gender perspective, however, several aspects of the Swedish welfare structure should rather work in favour of immigrant women's labour market integration. Neuman (2014:10) defines gender-specific institutions as "changes in the institutional setting that especially affect women's position on the labour market", and Jaumotte (2003) concludes that individual taxation schemes, childcare subsidies and paid maternity and parental leave generally have proven to be successful policy instruments for promoting women's employment. From an international perspective, the provision of such gender-specific institutions has been more far-reaching in Sweden than in many other countries (Neuman, 2014) and Kesler's (2006) findings also indicate that Sweden's institutional support for women's employment has been beneficial for both native and foreign-born women. In general, Swedish welfare transfers are primarily directed towards the individual rather than the family, thus providing additional economic incentives for women's employment. A significant deviation from this is the design of the parental insurance which is family-based, generally leading to an unequal distribution of parental leave between men and women (Berggren and Trädårdh, 2015). The committee report *Benefit and trap – parental benefits claims by recently arrived immigrants* (SOU 2012:9) also

⁷ It should be noted that the temporary law on limited possibilities of being granted a residence permit in Sweden (Law 2016:752) conditions permanent residence permit on employment. However, the respondents of this study all arrived prior to its implementation, and were therefore immediately granted permanent residence permit.

concluded that Sweden's generous parental insurance, where immigrant parents who arrived during the child's second year of life were entitled to the same amount of paid parental leave as those who gave birth in Sweden, delayed the labour market integration for a large share of newly arrived women with older children.⁸ Consequently, the regulatory framework of the parental insurance was tightened in 2017 in order to limit the parental benefit for newly arrived immigrants with older children (Government Bill 2016/17:154).

Integration policies

The design of integration policies evidently plays an important role in shaping immigrant's labour market integration and there is a general international consensus regarding recommended policy efforts, including early language tuition, skills assessment, validation and individualized introduction plans (MIPEX; Bucken-Knapp, Fakhri and Spehar, 2018). From a gender perspective, the European Parliament's report *Female refugees and asylum seekers: the issue of integration* (2016) stresses that integration policies that are developed in a gender-neutral manner most likely will fail to address the specific needs of female refugees as they experience gender-specific challenges in the host country, including for example not being able to reconcile family care and language or employment training (Sansonetti, 2016). A recent mapping of integration measures in the Nordic countries (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018) further revealed that even though the importance of *gender sensitivity* is often emphasized in policy documents, gender-specific measures are rarely found when looking at the actual implementation and concrete activities of the national integration programmes.

Turning more specifically to the Swedish case, the 2010 implementation of the Establishment Reform (Law 2010:197) meant that responsibility for the introduction of newly arrived immigrants and their families became more centralized as it was transferred from the municipalities to the Public Employment Service (PES), with the intention to provide a more uniform and work-oriented introduction across the country (Government Bill 2009:10/60). All immigrants covered by the law were registered at the PES and provided an individualized introduction plan, usually lasting for a maximum of 24 months and involving Swedish for

⁸ However, it should be noted that the figures in this report originated from a mapping conducted among newly arrived women who had arrived in Sweden in 2006, i.e. prior to the 2010 implementation of the new introduction programme. More recent register data from the PES demonstrate that the share of newly arrived women that do not register themselves in the introduction programme, or only participate part-time due to parental leave, is relatively small, and that this alone cannot explain the gender gap in employment outcomes (Wickström and Östervall, 2017).

immigrants (SFI), civic orientation and various employment preparation activities (e.g. validation of educational and professional experience, internships, training etc.). Generally, the activities of the introduction was equivalent to full-time employment and an individualized introduction benefit was granted upon attendance in assigned activities (OECD 2016). This system remained largely unchanged until January 1, 2018, when a new regulatory framework for the introduction of newly arrived immigrants was implemented with the purpose to strengthen demands on individual responsibility and to better harmonize the introduction programme with regular employment policies. In the new framework, the formal right to an individualized introduction plan has been removed and replaced by an obligation to participate in employment preparation activities (Government Bill 2016/17:175). In practice, however, the main structure and content of the introduction programme has not changed significantly; the PES is still responsible for designing individualized introduction plans lasting for a maximum of 24 months, and remuneration is conditioned upon full-time attendance in assigned activities.

9

Looking at the situation for newly arrived women, several features of the Establishment Reform (Law 2010:197), such as the individualized introduction benefit and mandatory civic orientation course, were partly motivated from a gender equality perspective (Government Bill 2009:10/60; Larsson, 2015). But despite these equality ambitions, a number of audits, inquiries and other reports have since then identified significant shortcomings regarding the introduction of newly arrived women. In the aforementioned report *The right to participate. Recently arrived women and family member immigrants in the labour market*¹⁰ (SOU 2012:69), it was concluded that newly arrived women were consistently offered less extensive and relevant support for labour market integration in comparison to their male counterparts, partly due to the prevalence of gender-stereotyped preconceptions among public officials. When examining the state budget from a gender perspective, The Swedish Women's Lobby further found that budget appropriations within the area of labour market integration were directed primarily towards male-dominated sectors, while validation efforts, wage-subsidies and other support measures were given less priority within female-dominated branches of the labour market, such as the health and social care sector (Dahlin, 2017). A recent working paper published by the

⁹ Within the new framework, this also include studies. Prior to 1 January 2018, those who during the time frame of the introduction plan started university studies were transferred to the CSN, thus taking student loans instead of introduction benefits.

¹⁰ In this report, “newly/recently arrived women” involved women who had been residing in Sweden for up to four years.

PES also confirmed that newly arrived women systematically have a lower chance of being offered employment preparation activities early on in the introduction programme (Cheung and Rödin, 2018).

Lack of recognition of foreign qualifications

Many studies have demonstrated that immigrants generally receive a low return on education and professional experience acquired in the source country and the lack of recognition of foreign qualifications consequently constitutes a significant institutional barrier for labour market integration (Sumption, 2013; Cangiano, 2014). Across most OECD countries, the country in which a person has obtained his or her highest educational qualification is a stronger determinant of wage levels and the probability of being over-qualified than one's country of birth, a pattern which is particularly strong in Sweden (OECD, 2016). In Sweden there has further been a lack of sufficient methods to validate competences and experience acquired in other ways than through formal education or professional employment, thus making it increasingly difficult to identify the occupational background of many newly arrived women (SOU 2012:69). The PES have also concluded that newly arrived women are considered to be in need of validation efforts to a lesser extent than their male counterparts even after controlling for factors such as age, educational background and professional experience (Cheung, 2018).

2.3 Individual barriers

Educational level

Educational level is a human capital factor with a substantial bearing on immigrant's labour market integration and data from the 2014 EU Labour Force Survey ([LFS](#)) show that in comparison to other migrant groups, a larger share of refugee women have a low level of education. Nearly 50 per cent are low educated, while the corresponding figures for refugee men and non-refugee women from outside the EU is 40 and 37 per cent, respectively. Further, the difference in employment rates between refugee women with a high and low level of education amounts to nearly 40 percentage points (69 versus 30 per cent) (European Commission and OECD, 2016). In Sweden, the educational disparity between native and foreign-born adults is among the largest in the OECD, and considering the high skill demands of the Swedish labour market, a shorter educational background consequently constitutes a significant barrier for labour market integration (OECD, 2016).

Language proficiency

Closely intertwined with the educational level, proficiency in the host country's language is a central factor both for the economic and social integration of immigrants (OECD 2016), and has proven to be a strong determinant of labour market performance (Chiswick and Miller, 2002). While most studies concerning immigrant's language acquisition have focused on labour and family migrants, Van Tubergen's (2010) study on refugees in the Netherlands found that both pre- and post-migration characteristics, including educational background, length of stay in reception centers, exposure to host country language and personal health conditions had an effect on refugee's language acquisition.

In Sweden, employer demands for language proficiency are particularly high (OECD, 2016) and Rooth and Åslund (2006) found that a good command of the Swedish language increased the probability of gaining employment with about ten per cent. From a gender perspective, studies in the Nordic context have demonstrated a stronger correlation between host country language proficiency and employment rates for women in comparison to men, and that the probability of receiving social benefits decreased with increased language skills among women, a correlation not found among men (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018).

Access to social and professional networks

A growing literature has demonstrated the value of informal contacts on the labour market and immigrants' access to social and professional networks in the host country has been therefore put forward as an important facilitator for labour market integration (Åslund, Forslund and Liljeberg, 2017; OECD, 2016). Yet, an important distinction is often made between inter- and intra-ethnic networks. For example, drawing on survey data Lance and Hartung (2012) found that inter-ethnic friendships reduced the duration of unemployment among Turkish immigrants in Germany, while intra-ethnic friendships showed no effect on employment. There is, however, a lack of research concerning the relative weight and use of personal networks from a gender perspective (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018; Wickström Österva, 2017).

Cultural values

A society's culture, in terms of attitudes about gender roles and women's appropriate place in society, has alongside factors such as discrimination and the provision of gender-specific

institutions increasingly been put forward as a plausible explanation for differences in female employment and labour force participation rates across countries (Neuman, 2014). For instance, by using data from the World Value Surveys, Fortin (2005) displayed how anti-egalitarian views and perceptions about women's role as home-makers in 25 OECD-countries were negatively associated with female employment.

From the perspective of labour market integration, source country cultural values that primarily ascribe women the role of homemakers could consequently affect the prospects for immigrant women's labour market participation in the host country, as the domestic and caring role may still be a preferred and legitimate option for many of these women (see Salway 2007). A number of studies have also demonstrated how cultural values are transmitted from the source country to affect gender gaps in labour market outcomes in the host country. Using gender gaps in labour force participation rates (LFPR) as a proxy for culture, scholars have found in these studies a positive correlation between source country and host country levels of LFPR in both the United States and Europe.¹¹ In a similar study in the Swedish context, Neuman (2014) also concluded that source country culture is an important explanatory factor for why gender gaps in LFPR vary across different immigrant groups, despite Sweden's extensive provision of gender-specific institutions.

While most studies on the effects of source country culture, as illustrated above, have been of quantitative nature, Evans and Bowlby's (2000) qualitative interview study on the experiences of Pakistani Muslim women in Britain as well found that the place of paid work was a contested area within the Pakistani diaspora, involving several competing ideas about the appropriate role for women. Often, these ideas appeared to be strongly connected to the women's life stage and class-position (Evans and Bowlby, 2000).

3. Analytical framework

As illustrated in the literature review, previous research has identified number of distinct labour market obstacles for refugee women on both a structural, institutional and individual level. Including, among others, employer discrimination, integration policies, educational level and cultural values. Still, less is known about the interlinkages and relative weight of these barriers,

¹¹ See for example Antecol, 2000; 2001; Blau, Kahn and Papps, 2011; Bredtmann and Otten, 2013; Fleischmann and Höhne, 2013.

and consequently what the key factors are that impedes refugee women's integration on the Swedish labour market. To help trace these factors, this study will apply an intersectional approach.

3.1 Background and development of intersectionality

The term "intersectionality" was originally coined by U.S. legal researcher Kimberlé Crenshaw to illustrate the situation of black women at the intersection of gender and race. In her seminal article *Mapping the margins*, Crenshaw (1991) explored the race and gender dimension of violence against women and demonstrated how the intersectional identity of black women, as both women and of colour, rendered them invisible within the discourses of both feminism and antiracism who failed to recognize their marginalized position. In this context, intersectionality as a heuristic term was initially employed to expose how single-axis thinking, focusing solely on one dimension of power structure, undermined struggles for social justice (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013).

Since then, intersectionality has become a "travelling" concept which has been attributed new meanings in different contexts (Knapp, 2005). While some define it as a theory, others see it as a heuristic device and still others regard it as a reading strategy for feminist analysis (Davis, 2008). Political scientist Ang-Marie Hancock (2007:63-64), for example, defines intersectionality as "*both* a normative theoretical argument *and* an approach to conducting empirical research that emphasizes the interaction of categories of difference". While its original conceptualization was used to expose various forms of oppression, intersectionality has thus over time developed into a broader approach that can be applied in order to analyze empirically the intersecting effects of the different identity categories that people hold. Consequently, some argue, intersectionality is not necessarily a concept that just applies to the situation of particularly marginalized or oppressed groups, but rather represents an aspect of social organization that shape the lives of all individuals, whether they are intersectionally privileged, marginalized, or "a bit of both" (Weldon, 2008:195; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

3.2 Application and operationalization of intersectionality

Paraphrasing Hancock's definition (2007:64), intersectionality is in this study understood as an analytical approach and tool that is applied in order to help trace the key underlying causes that impede refugee women's labour market integration. This more eclectic use of

intersectionality recognizes that the relationships between the chosen identity categories is an open, empirical question (Hancock, 2007) and that their effects can be both autonomous *and* intersectional. For example, that gender alone can affect the process of labour market integration, but also the intersection of gender and ethnicity, or the intersection of age and class. This enables a more open and less pre-determined approach towards the collected data in comparison to more normative applications of intersectionality, which often tend to assume that the different identity categories always work together as a single, inseparable and often oppressive, system (Weldon, 2008).

When applying an intersectional approach, the number of categories to include constitutes an analytical challenge, but in order to make the analytical process manageable it is necessary to delimit the number of categories and select those who are considered most important for the specific purpose and research question of one's study (Christensen and Jensen, 2012). Based on the current knowledge regarding refugee women's labour market integration, *gender*, *ethnicity*, *class* and *age* have been chosen as the strategic "anchor points" in the design of this study (McCall, 2005; Christensen and Jensen, 2012). As illustrated in the literature review, many of the previously identified labour market barriers can be related to either gender (e.g. provision of gender-specific institutions), ethnicity (e.g. employer discrimination) or class (e.g. educational background). In addition, age has also been shown to have a significant impact on the probability of finding employment for newly arrived women in Sweden, as employment rates for this group begin to sharply decline at the age of 45 (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018). Since both gender, ethnicity and class represent theoretically contested concepts, the following operationalizations have primarily been derived from previous studies within the field of migration and integration research.¹²

Gender

Gender can refer to the biological as well as social categories of women and men. In much feminist literature, gender has been defined as the culturally and socially constructed roles and behaviors that society, groups and individuals expect of men and women (Riaño and Baghdadi, 2007). Women are for example often ascribed a domestic and caring role, while men more often are expected to be the full-time working "breadwinner" of the family. In this study,

¹² See for example Kelly and Lusi, 2006; Riaño and Baghdadi, 2007; Kynsilehto, 2011; Mügge and de Jong, 2013.

gender is operationalized as both biological sex and socially constructed gender roles, and is thus also closely connected to a woman's position within the family (see Kynsilehto, 2011).

Ethnicity

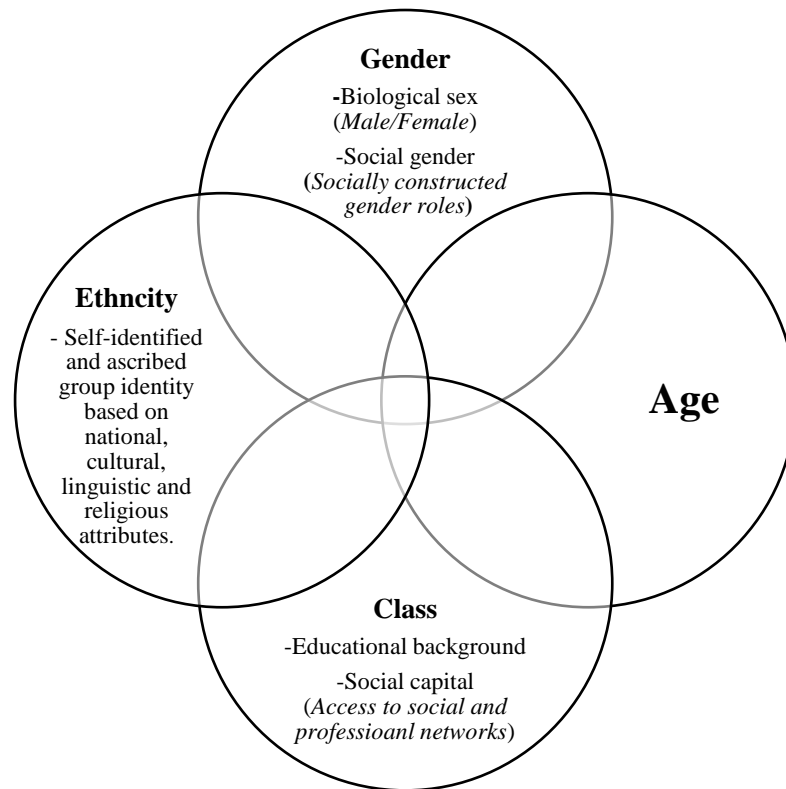
The conceptual meaning of ethnicity primarily refers to national, cultural, linguistic, religious or other attributes that are perceived as characteristic of specific groups. Furthermore, ethnicity is generally understood in territorial terms and strongly bound to nation states, as it generally makes a distinction between local and foreign populations. Therefore, it is also a more commonly used concept than race in the European context (Mügge and de Jong, 2013). According to Riaño and Baghdadi (2007), ethnicity can be studied from the perspective of self-identification, (i.e. how individuals and groups perceive themselves as having a collective identity), or from the perspective of dominant groups who are categorizing minority groups (e.g. the ethnic majority population's creation of boundaries between "natives" and "immigrants"). In this study, ethnicity is operationalized as both self-identified and ascribed group identity based on national, cultural, linguistic and religious attributes.

Class

Class is a complex concept and to account for the historical development and extensive theorization surrounding it is well beyond the scope of this study. The operationalization of class that will be used in this study has therefore been primarily derived from previous research on migration and class, which has applied Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social capital and cultural capital as being convertible into economic capital and consequently constitutive of class positioning.¹³ For the purpose of this thesis, a modified version of Bourdieu's theory will be applied in order to connect previous research findings to the intersectional approach. Class is therefore operationalized as the combination of educational background and social capital, the later referring to "the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu, 1986:21) i.e. the access an individual has to social and professional networks (Kelly and Lusi, 2006).

Figure 2. Operationalization of intersectionality.

¹³ See for example Kelly and Lusi, 2006; Riaño and Baghdadi, 2007; Cederberg, 2012.



4. Methods

4.1 In-depth interviewing

The method chosen for this study is in-depth interviewing. One important strength of a qualitative research design lies in its ability to generate a deeper knowledge about complex processes and individual experiences (Marshall and Rossman, 2016:100), thus making it a well-suited methodological strategy for exploring in more detail the key underlying causes that impedes refugee women's labour market integration. Through the collection of individual interview accounts, it will be possible to gain deeper insights concerning the relative weight and interlinkages of the structural, institutional and individual labour market barriers that have been identified in previous research. Against this background, the overall research design can best be described as abductive, as it emphasizes the interaction between previous research and new empirical data (Esaiasson et.al., 2017:285)

Qualitative interviews come in many forms: Patton (2002: 341-347) makes a distinction between the informal interview, the interview guide and the standardized interview. While

informal interviews are more spontaneous and standardized interviews more thoroughly scripted, the interview guide requires that the researcher schedules each interview and prepares a number of topics or questions in order to explore the respondent's view and experiences of the phenomena of interest, but simultaneously respects the way in which the respondent chooses to structure and frame the answers (Marshall and Rossman, 2016: 150). This less standardized approach is common when conducting in-depth interviews as both the ordering, formulation and content of interview questions can vary from one interview to another, depending on how the dialogue between researcher and respondent unfolds (Esaiasson et. al., 2017: 236). Therefore, the interview guide emerged as the most suitable approach for the purpose of this study.

4.2 Selection of respondents

Sampling procedure

A combination of criterion and snowball sampling was used in order to identify and recruit participants for this study (Marshall and Rossman, 2016:115). The initial target population was women who had been enrolled in and completed the two-year introduction programme and who currently had a weak attachment to the Swedish labour market, being either unemployed, outside the labour force, or holding insecure employment¹⁴, e.g. being employed by the hour. As was illustrated in the literature review, cultural values regarding gender roles has been put forward as an explanation for immigrant women's lower labour force participation, (e.g. Antecol, 2000; 2000; Neuman, 2014) and it could be expected that this is an underlying reason for why some refugee women might be unwilling to participate on the labour market. Therefore, I further chose to focus on the experiences of refugee women who despite expressing a positive attitude and strong willingness to establish themselves on the Swedish labour market, had still not succeeded in finding a secure employment. Considering the intersectional approach, it was also important to ensure a sufficient variation on demographic factors within the sample, including educational background, age, family situation and country of birth.

A number of non-governmental organizations, women's groups and public officials in three Swedish municipalities of varying size were contacted and aided me in the recruitment process.

¹⁴ Figures from Statistics Sweden show that one out of four foreign born women in Sweden are working in insecure employment (Alkhaffaji, 2018).

This sampling strategy necessarily involved the use of third persons, who acted as “gatekeepers”, in order to reach the specified target population. Researchers are in many contexts dependent on the support of gatekeepers as it might not be possible to approach potential participants directly, however, negotiating access to participants in this manner also involve some risks (Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert, 2008). Firstly, gatekeepers can always choose to decline a researcher’s request to recruit participants in a specific setting, and secondly, they also “have the power to determine the ways in which potential participants are informed about the study and the process of consent, which may influence potential participants’ willingness to participate” (Wiles et.al. 2005:18, cited Sanghera and Thapar-Björkert, 2008). Despite these potential pitfalls, the support from gatekeepers proved invaluable during the process of recruiting respondents as it turned out to be more challenging than expected to reach the target population, and, as will be further discussed below, the respondents’ informed consent was thoroughly ensured regardless of the channels through which they had been recruited or what information they had received beforehand.

Sample composition

In total, a number of 16 women were interviewed during April- June 2018, half of them individually and the other half in pairs of two. The rationale for choosing to interview half of the respondents in pairs was that my access to interpreters was very limited and I wanted to ensure that all respondents were given adequate translation support during the interviews if needed (see more on the role of interpreters in section 4.4). As the respondents in each pair knew one another beforehand, it did not appear as if the presence of another person during the interview had any significant impact on their willingness to share personal experiences.

Looking at the demographic composition of the sample, nine respondents were born in Syria, four in Somalia, two in Afghanistan and one in Palestine. Regarding educational background, three respondents were illiterate with no previous schooling, five had received between six and nine years of schooling, three had an upper-secondary education¹⁵, one had attended liberal adult education (similar to the Swedish “Folkhögskola”) and four held university degrees. Their age ranged from 34 to 57 years, with an average age of 44 years. In comparison to the overall age composition within the newly arrived population in Sweden, where the vast majority of newly arrived women are under the age of 39 upon arrival (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018),

¹⁵ This group had also attended university for one or two years, but had not completed any degrees.

the average age of the sample was a bit higher. However, as the respondents had resided in Sweden for an average of almost five years, the majority had been between the ages of 30 and 45 upon arrival. The respondents' family situation also involved some variation as ten respondents were married, while the remaining six were either divorced, widowed or single. Further, all respondents but three had children of varying age and ten of them had arrived to Sweden with minors. Lastly, it should be mentioned that three respondents who volunteered to participate fell outside the initial target group as they had not completed the introduction programme; Elena was still enrolled in the programme at the time of the interview, Waris had arrived in Sweden a few years prior to the implementation of the programme, and Susana had been forced to interrupt her participation due to health problems. Nonetheless, these interviews yielded important insights in relation to the study's purpose and were therefore still included. All respondent demographics are displayed in Appendix A.

A fundamental question when conducting qualitative interview studies is how many respondents to include and the answer essentially depends on the purpose of one's study (Kvale, 2007:44). Consequently, the decision to limit the number of respondents of this study at 16 was primarily motivated by two aspects. Firstly, as illustrated above, considering the intersectional approach the sample at this point involved a sufficient demographic variation. Secondly, the subsequent analysis of the collected interview accounts had at this point reached theoretical sufficiency (Dey, 1999) as a number of central themes, i.e. key factors, had been initially identified and consistently confirmed in later interviews. The more commonly used concept of theoretical saturation is criticized by Dey (1999: 116-117) as it "has connotations of completion [and] seems to imply that the process of generating categories (and their properties and relations) has been exhaustive". Recalling this study's conceptualization of labour market integration as a process involving different challenges that may vary in their significance for different women, I agree with Day in the sense that it would not have been possible to ever claim a complete "saturation" of potential key factors, regardless of how many more interviews that had been conducted.

4.3 Formulating the interview guide

Previous research findings and the intersectional approach were combined to create a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix B) focusing on four central themes (1) Source country

experiences and migration to Sweden, (2) The Swedish Introduction programme (3) Experiences of job-searching, and (4) Thoughts about the future.

As discussed in section 4.2, the intersectional approach was primarily incorporated through the sampling procedure, but also when formulating the interview guide my intention was to create a good balance between the intersectional approach and previous research. One advantageous technique for including an intersectional dimension that has been used in previous studies is to draw on biographical interviews, to help identify the impact of different identity categories in the respondent's broader life-story narrative (e.g. Erel, 2007; Christensen and Jensen, 2012). Although this study centers on the integration process in Sweden, some inspiration was taken from the biographical approach by incorporating questions relating both to pre- and post-migration life situation, as well as visions for the future, in the interview guide. This helped to contextualize experiences of the integration process in a wider perspective, and it further provided insights into how gender, ethnicity, class and age affected the respondents' everyday lives. When the respondents' own reflections and narratives touched upon issues pertaining to, for example gender or age, they were also encouraged to develop their thoughts further.

While not systematically and explicitly addressing each and one of the labour market barriers identified in previous research, some questions in the interview guide still referred to these barriers, for example: *Was there someone outside of the PES and social services that you could turn to for support and advice during and after your time in the introduction programme?* (Access to social and professional networks); *Did you receive a personal introduction plan? If so, can you describe what activities it contained?* (Integration policy). Further, a number of more broadly formulated questions also encouraged respondents to reflect on the potential barriers for labour market integration, for example: *Could you describe your thoughts about participating in the Swedish labour market in the future?*

Focusing more specifically on the formulation of the interview questions, I followed Brinkmann and Kvale's (2015:157) guiding statement that "a good interview question should contribute thematically to knowledge production and dynamically to promoting a good interview interaction". This implies that while the formulated interview questions thematically should relate to the more conceptual or theoretical foundations of the research topic, they should also dynamically encourage and stimulate a positive interaction in the interview situation, where respondents feel comfortable to open up about their experiences. Preferably, the interview questions should be short, easy to understand and descriptively formulated (e.g.

Could you tell me about your experiences of...? How did you feel when...?) (ibid:157-159). Therefore, the questions in the interview guide were formulated with the intention to encourage more descriptive and elaborative answers from the respondents. Each theme was introduced with a broadly framed introductory question about the respondent's thoughts and experiences in relation to the theme in question, followed by a number of suggested follow-up questions, which could be adjusted and altered depending on how the interview unfolded (ibid: 159-160; Esaiasson et. al., 2017: 236). This strategy proved successful as it made it possible to pursue and explore different interesting tracks during each individual interview (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 217). The interview guide thus served literally as a *guide*, which ensured that the most central topics were addressed during the interviews, rather than a standardized blueprint of questions following a fixed order.

4.4 Ethical considerations

When conducting interview research, ethical concerns naturally arise due to the complexities of “researching private lives and placing accounts in the public arena” (Birch et.al., 2002:1, cited in Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:85). As the methodological approach of this study centered on exploring individual experience, it was thus essential to ensure that ethical considerations were kept in mind throughout the whole research process, both when collecting, analyzing and reporting the interview data.

Concerning the data collection process, it was important to make sure that all respondents were fully informed about the purpose of the study and what their participation would entail. Therefore, each respondent was thoroughly briefed before starting the interview session. They were informed about the purpose of the study, how their identities would be protected and their responses kept strictly confidential, that the interview transcriptions would be used for academic purposes only, that they were free to decline answering particular questions and that they at any point had the right to withdraw from participation (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:93-94; Marshall and Rossman, 2016:52). When interpreters were present, their strict confidentiality was also clarified for the respondent (see more on the role of interpreters below). Lastly, each respondent received my contact details in case any questions or concerns would arise after the interview. The choice not to draft an informed consent form for the participants to sign was motivated by several reasons. Firstly, a written document assumes literacy, a skill that not all respondents fully mastered due to their differing educational backgrounds.

Considering variations in Swedish proficiency and mother tongue, it would have also been difficult to ensure that all respondents sufficiently understood the content and meaning of such a form, as the resources for formal translation were limited. Marshall and Rossman (2016:55) further emphasize the cultural challenges related to written consent forms, as this is a uniquely Western approach for ensuring informed consent. Therefore, it could not be ruled out that some respondents might not have felt comfortable putting their name or mark on a formal document.

When possible, interviews were conducted in Swedish or English. But as language proficiency varied significantly within the target population I also, due to the limited resources of a Master's thesis, had to rely on the help of informal (i.e. unauthorized) interpreters in a number of interviews. While being aware of the potential risks associated with this, including interview data getting "lost in translation" and the interpreter's possible influence on the tone and structure of the interview (Kosny et.al., 2014), this still appeared as the most suitable option in order to generate a richer set of data. The use of interpreters also facilitated the recruitment of respondents with a shorter educational background, as many within this group still had a very limited command of Swedish. Further, several strategies were employed to ensure sure that translations were as accurate as possible and that the presence of the interpreter did not significantly affect the respondents' willingness to share their experiences. Firstly, this involved making sure all interpreters were female and before starting the interview informing them about confidentiality requirements, the purpose of the study and what topics that would be covered in the interview. They were also asked to translate as verbatim as possible. During the course of the interview all questions and probes were directed to the respondent, rather than the interpreter and verifying questions were frequently asked to ensure that the overall meaning expressed by the respondent was correctly understood by both interpreter and interviewer.

While not expecting that the overarching theme of labour market integration in itself would be a particularly sensitive topic for the respondents, the interview guide nevertheless centered on personal experiences and touched upon areas that could be difficult for some respondents to open up about, for example concerning their family situation. Fortunately, the semi-structured character of the interviews made it possible to modify each interview session in accordance with what the respondent felt comfortable talking about in relation to the central themes of the interview guide. In this way, it was possible to avoid the risk of compelling respondents to discuss topics they did not feel comfortable with, while simultaneously encouraging them to pursue and elaborate on subjects they found important (see Payne, 2017:55-56).

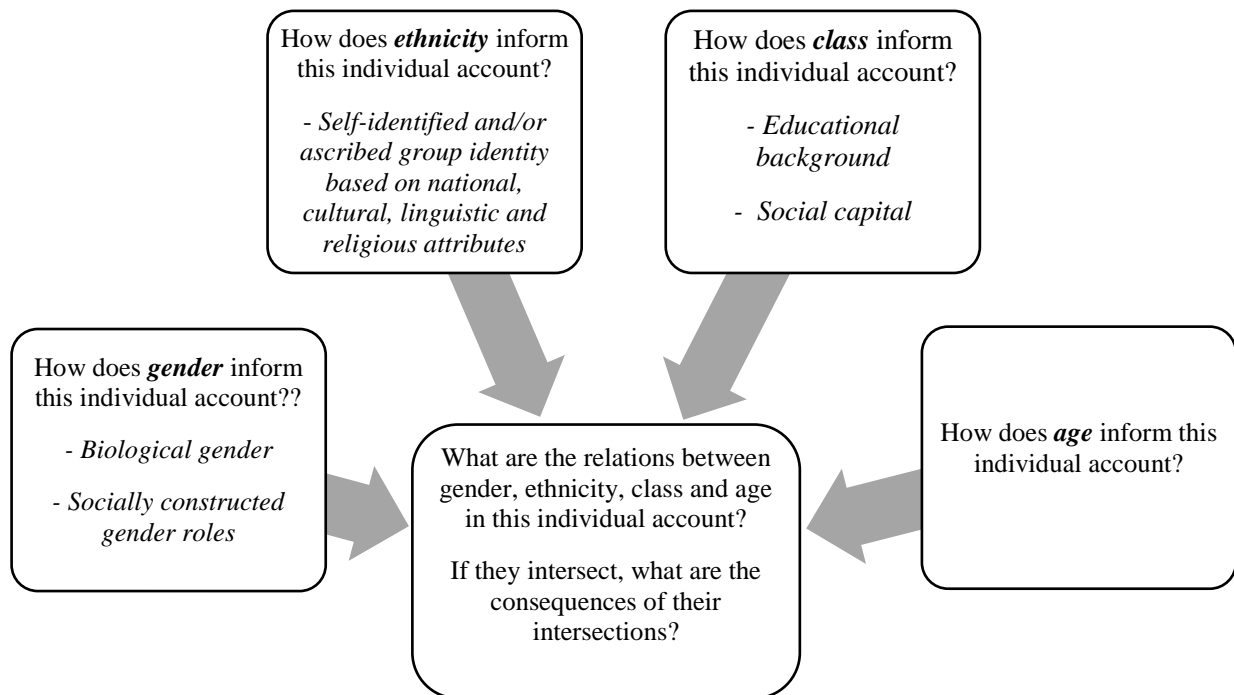
Lastly, to safeguard the respondents' privacy when reporting the research findings (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:95) all respondents were given pseudonyms and no information that could be traced back to an individual respondent, such as residential areas and workplaces, is disclosed in the thesis.

4.5 Data analysis and interpretation

With the respondents' informed consent all interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed using the software programme *Transcribe Wreally*. Thereafter, in order to guide and structure the analytical process, I chose to apply the two-step intersectional analysis suggested by Cuadraz and Uttal's (1999). Considering that intersectionality in this study serves the role of an analytical approach and tool, this two-step analysis emerged as the most suitable option as it allowed a less normative and more practically feasible application of the concept.

This meant that I **firstly** approached each individual interview account and the chosen identity categories separately: *how does gender/ethnicity/class/age, respectively, inform this individual account of the integration process?* After having highlighted the explicit and implicit references to these categories, I proceeded to the **second** step of the analysis. This entailed once again approaching each individual interview account, but focusing on the relationships between the categories: *what are the relations between gender, ethnicity, class and age in this individual account of the integration process? If they intersect, what are the consequences of their intersections?*

Figure 3. Analytical tool, primarily derived from Cuadraz and Uttal (1999).



In line with the abductive research design, this analytical process thus involved the use of a concept-driven coding (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015:227) based on a fixed template of codes generated from the study's operationalization of gender, ethnicity, class and age, in combination with a more inductive search for recurring themes, i.e. key factors, that emerged as important for understanding the broader phenomena of refugee women's difficulties with entering and establishing themselves on the Swedish labour market.¹⁶

5. Results and analysis

Through the collection of refugee women's own accounts of their labour market integration process and the application of the two-step intersectional analysis, the following key factors impeding a successful labour market integration could be identified:

- Insufficient institutional support

¹⁶ See Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) for a further discussion on theme development in qualitative research.

- Perceived lack of institutional support after the introduction period¹⁷
- Lack of access to relevant and forward-looking employment preparation activities
- Perceived devaluation of competence
- Perceived difficulties with “starting over”

In the remainder of this section, these key factors will be presented in more detail using shorter illustrative vignettes and quotes from the collected interview data. As all interviews except for one were conducted or interpreted in Swedish, the majority of quotes have been translated into English by the author. This has been done as verbatim as possible, but grammatical errors have been corrected when needed as to avoid the risk of misapprehensions.

5.1 Insufficient institutional support

The most significant pattern emerging from the collected interview data was an insufficient institutional support for labour market integration. This primarily manifested itself in two forms. *Firstly*, as the perceived lack of institutional support after the introduction period, and *secondly*, as the lack of access to relevant and forward-looking employment preparation activities.

5.1.1 Perceived lack of institutional support after the introduction period

Throughout the interviews, the most frequently, and explicitly, expressed issue was a perceived lack of institutional support once the introduction plan was completed and participation in the introduction programme had come to an end. As illustrated in the stories of Leah, Mahrooz Bilan and Rana, this issue applied to a variety of respondents with differing backgrounds and was exacerbated due to a perceived lack of social capital, often stemming from the autonomous and intersecting effects of gender and ethnicity.

Leah

In 2014, thirty-four-year-old Leah came to Sweden from Syria with her husband and two small children. She holds a Master’s degree in English and has five years of professional experience as a high school teacher and university lecturer. Since her arrival in Sweden, Leah has finished all levels of SFI and SAS (Swedish as a second language), and in January 2017 she received

¹⁷ Introduction period here refers to the time period when newly-arrived immigrants participate in the introduction programme and have an introduction plan, most commonly lasting for two years.

her Swedish teaching certificate after having completed the ULV Programme (Complementary Education for Foreign Teachers). Since then she has been struggling to find permanent employment that corresponds to her education, but explains that she feels insecure about where she should turn to for guidance and advice now that she has left the introduction programme:

They told me that I have to read this ULV Programme, so I did. But after this, when I want advice I do not know where to turn. Because the PES, I am not enrolled in the PES¹⁸ [introduction programme], anymore, so I ask people...some give me the wrong advice, or they do not know, because I ask those immigrants, who are like me. I do not have any contact with the Swedes, or I do not have any friends, because I always study with migrants... It has been really difficult for me actually, since I left the introduction programme because I could not find the right place to ask or go to.

Despite her advanced language skills, Leah perceives that the intersection of her gender and ethnicity, materialized through her scarf, creates problems in her interactions with the ethnic majority population, consequently limiting her social capital in Sweden:

It is difficult for me to work here, or to be accepted by everyone, because everyone does not want us. And it is difficult for me. My husband, when we are talking about men, not women, then it is easier for him, he is more accepted than I am. Because they do not know if he is a Muslim or a Christian, they do not know about his religion or background or whether he is newly arrived in Sweden. But when they look at me, they know. (...) And they have prejudices about me. That is why it is difficult for me.

Mahrooz

When turning to Mahrooz, a forty-four year old Afghan woman, her background differs significantly from Leah's as she has never engaged in paid work or attended any formal education. In Afghanistan, her primary responsibilities included taking care of home and children, and upon arrival in Sweden five years ago her literacy skills were limited to writing

¹⁸ When stating that they have “left” the PES, respondents referred to having completed the introduction programme. However, several of them, including Leah, remained registered at the PES, but were transferred to The Job and Development Guarantee Programme that is directed towards individuals who have been unemployed for a long time. According to the PES, taking part in the programme “will provide you with tailor-made activities that will help you find a job (PES, 2017).

her own name. Still, she explains that she had imagined herself working after the introduction plan was completed:

I planned that during two years I will learn the language, after two years I will be working.

Today, Mahrooz is under the auspices of social services and due to her lack of previous schooling she is still struggling with learning the Swedish language. She still hopes to approach the labour market by first finding an internship position, but since the introduction programme ended she no longer knows how to proceed to reach her goal, as she perceives that she is not getting enough help from the social services:

No, nobody helps me (...) The social services only send money.

Overall, Mahrooz expresses feelings of abandonment and confusion regarding where to turn for guidance and support after having left the introduction programme, and also describes that she initially stayed at home for a period when her introduction plan was finished, before social services registered her in a language class. She perceives that she is not receiving sufficient institutional support and further explains that she does not have anyone else to turn to. A fact that becomes particularly evident when at the end of the interview, she turns to me and asks whether I could help her find a job.

Bilan

Five years ago, thirty-nine-year-old Bilan came to Sweden with her husband and three small children. In Somalia, she had worked for many years both as a kinder garden teacher, saleswoman and caregiver for the elderly, but lacks educational qualifications as she only attended six years of primary school. Upon arrival in Sweden, Bilan explains she was aware that she would probably need to educate herself further to be able to integrate on the Swedish labour market, but feels disappointed over the insufficient support she has received from the PES. She describes that she had no influence over the content of her introduction plan and that she never received the opportunity to express her job preferences, or what competences she possessed. Still, Bilan was determined to approach the Swedish labour market and on her own managed to find two shorter internship positions during the introduction period. However, after having completed her introduction plan, the absence of institutional support has become

increasingly troublesome for her, even though she is registered in the so-called Job and Development Guarantee Programme at the PES:

After the introduction programme, you are entitled to start an education, or a job or...yes. But it is very difficult to get in touch with my employment officer. If I send e-mails she does not reply and I have tried to contact her several times and I have, I am not receiving any social benefits right now. I am not getting any help. I attend this language group and SFI, at two places, afternoon and morning, but there is nobody who, who pays me or takes care of me. I just decided on my own to come here.

As for Leah and Mahrooz, her dependence upon institutional support is amplified due to a perceived lack of other supporting networks in Sweden, and she explains that her weak language skills and the absence of Swedish peers in her daily activities makes it difficult to socially integrate with the ethnic majority population.

My idea is that young people and children who come here, they have Swedish friends and Swedish classmates, they, it is easy for them to integrate with the population, but for us adults, we have no classmates, no Swedish classmates... And we do not know the language and we, there is no one receiving us or who can meet us.

Rana

Fifty-two-year-old Rana from Syria is one of the oldest respondents in the sample. She arrived in Sweden four years ago and has since then completed her studies in SFI and SAS, and also graduated from the course “Mother tongue student counselor “. In Syria, Rana studied business for two years on university level and thereafter worked nine years as a saleswoman. When the store she worked in was shut down it forced her to stay at home for many years as she could not find a new job, and she therefore explains that it is very important for her to find work in Sweden. However, since completing her introduction plan and leaving the introduction programme six months ago, Rana feels she has not been given much support for approaching the labour market:

I know that once you leave the PES [introduction programme] there is no one who helps you (...) Look, when you come here there is no one who gives advice like you said. Because they do not, they do not know how you should start, for newly arrived when they come here. I am struggling on my own.

She is still registered at the PES, but explains that she rarely gets the chance to meet with her employment officer and suggest that this lack of support might be due to her higher age:

... I am not receiving any help from them.

[interviewer] *No... Can you think of any reasons why, why it has been like that?*

Hmm... Maybe it is age.

Like most respondents, Rana also perceives her inter-ethnic social capital as limited. Even though she would like to have more contact with the Swedish-born population, she does not know how or where to establish such contacts, especially since she does not have a job. And at the end of the interview, when asked about what kind of support she would need in order to find work, she despondently replies:

Who would give me that support? Who would give me that support? (...) I do not know. I am struggling to meet with someone who can give me the support that you are talking about.



The stories above illustrate a reoccurring issue, as a perceived lack of institutional support after the introduction period had come to an end was expressed by over half of the thirteen respondents who had participated in and completed the introduction programme¹⁹. This seemed to constitute a critical labour market barrier, as these respondents expressed concerns about no longer knowing where to turn for guidance and support in order approach the labour market and find employment. This became particularly evident as several of them, just like Mahrooz, reached out to me during the interview, asking for both practical information concerning matters such as validation systems, student loans and driving licenses, as well as for more general guidance on how to find work:

Can you give me some advice? It is difficult to just sit at home and I want to get a job and become better, for life to become better. (*Fariha, 42*)

¹⁹ Although a couple of respondents, including Bilan, were also dissatisfied with the content of the introduction programme in itself, this appeared to be a significantly less salient issue within the sample.

Even though a handful of respondents were still registered at the PES, they described that it was very difficult to get in touch with their employment officers and that they did not receive the help they asked for:

I waited, when I want to meet people there [PES] they said “no not now”. I wrote them, but other things came between and they forgot me and do not answer me (*Dalal, 52*).

...I do not meet the employment officer or talk to him, we do not make up a plan, we...I do not now, I do not know him or her. They sent to me by mail that my employment officer is “X”, I do not know if it is a man or a woman, I have not met her at all for two years. (*Leah, 34*)

... When I asked them [PES] they did not guide me at all, they said you have to do it on your own, you have to search on your own. Even when I got back to them, after I finished my Master's they said oh you are so good, you have, you know good...I mean your CV is good and you have those academic grades and whatever, so continue and get the teacher's license, it would be better for you , “bye, check”. (*Meryem, 34*)

While the respondents with a longer educational background and good command of Swedish had still managed to navigate themselves towards the Swedish labour market and apply for work on their own, Mahrooz and Fariha, both with a shorter educational background and weaker language skills, explained that the lack of institutional support initially led them to just stay at home once the introduction period had come to an end:

After two years the benefits decreased, I got money from the social services, less than from the PES (...) And I stayed at home and I forgot the language (*Fariha, 42*)

This perceived lack of sufficient institutional support was further exacerbated due to the limited social capital, specifically inter-ethnic contacts, that the vast majority of respondents expressed concerns about. As illustrated above, causes for the absence of inter-ethnic contacts varied between respondents, including poor language skills and perceptions of stereotyping and prejudice:

I cannot speak Swedish, it is difficult to make contact with other people. (*Mahrooz 44*)

...the Swedes have this particular idea, if I come from another country, maybe they think of me because I have the scarf. Or maybe they think something else, maybe feel scared

and there is this thing in Sweden that you cannot talk about religion and tradition and clothing. (*Hawa, 40*)

Domestic responsibilities in combination with intense day schedules was described as another factor constraining the opportunities for social interactions:

In Somalia we had more help from our parents, siblings, relatives, there were many people who could help take care of the children. But not in Sweden... So after language school it is just grocery shopping, eat, sleep. I have no time or energy to meet friends, other people. (*Anissa, 46*)

Lastly, a couple of respondents also discussed how source country gender roles still affected their behavior in social interactions with the opposite sex in Sweden. While expressing their appreciation and support for more gender-egalitarian values, in practice they still found it difficult to adjust to Swedish customs:

... We who come from a country that, there are not so many people that maybe.... Me as a woman do not meet men that often and work with them... So maybe I feel shy sometimes or something, yes. But it is not because I do not want to talk to them, but a little shy, yes, it is because of my traditions. In my home country, in your apartment you can sit with all the men who visits you, we sit together, but not with people who you do not know, then you only greet them ... So there are some boundaries. (*Hawa, 40*)

...in my life, if I do this to a man [demonstrating a handshake] it is not good. (...) I cannot do this to a man, it means something else. It means something wrong if I do this to a man. (*Dalal, 52*)

5.1.2 Lack of access to relevant and forward-looking employment preparation activities

In contrast to Mahrooz's account, three other respondents with a short educational background and lack of professional experience appeared to be less critical about the institutional support they had received after the introduction period. However, the accounts of Anissa and Tanaad simultaneously illustrate how a lack of access to relevant and forward-looking employment preparation activities also runs the risk of creating lock-in effects and delaying language acquisition.

Anissa

In Somalia, forty-six-year-old Anissa was a full-time homemaker carrying the responsibility for child rearing, cooking and cleaning. Upon her arrival in Sweden three years ago, she was illiterate without any previous schooling and describes that right now her primary goal is to master the Swedish language. She further explains that in her home country, prior to the outbreak of the civil war, paid labour was not really a conceivable option for women and that she consequently finds it difficult to imagine what she would be interested in working with in the future:

It is not very common for women to work there, in my home country. If a woman, before the war, if a woman would work it would be a bit shameful. But once the war started, women came out and started working as well. But we are not educated and we do not have any professions... When someone asks you what you want to work with, it gets a bit strange too, because in my home country it is the men who work, they work outside and we work at home.

Despite lacking a clear professional identity, Anissa stresses that she is “always ready to work” and at the time of the interview she has recently begun working in a so called special employment.²⁰ This means that in connection to her language class, she does cleaning work in the school facilities for a couple of hours a day. While this form of subsidized, part-time employment can be a valuable first step for approaching the labour market, it simultaneously runs the risk of creating lock-in effects by discouraging job-seeking or further education, as illustrated when Anissa was asked about her thoughts on how to proceed after her introduction plan was completed:

My thought was to apply for work as a cleaner, so, but now I have got this job and I thank God.

Tanaad

Just like Anissa, forty-one year old Tanaad came to Sweden from Somalia without any previous labour market experience and is also currently working in special employment, which primarily

²⁰ Special employment is a state- subsidized employment where long-term unemployed or newly arrived individuals can work as a resource for employers in the welfare, public, culture or non-profit sector. A special employment can last for twelve months, full-time or part-time, with the possibility of being extended for an additional twelve months (PES, 2018).

involves doing needlework in a sewing atelier. Tanaad recalls that as a child she dreamt of becoming a doctor, but due to her family's economic situation she had to leave school when she was only twelve years old and has since then been a full-time homemaker. She has lived in Sweden for six years, but because of her short educational background she is still struggling with learning the Swedish language. While declaring that she can picture herself working in many different professions in the future, for example within the school system, Tanaad perceives that her weak language skills right now constitutes the most central obstacle for her to overcome in order to approach unsubsidized employment on the Swedish labour market:

....I hope for a good future and that I will find permanent employment at some point in my life. And I also want to keep on struggling and learn the language (...) It is only the Swedish language that would help me in the future. That is all I can think.

However, as her colleagues in the atelier are also foreign-born women, her employment does not involve much exposure to and practical use of the Swedish language, and she further explains that her contacts with native Swedes is still very limited:

It is only the SFI teacher that is Swedish that I meet and then when I go home it is just neighbors saying "Hi Tanaad", nothing else.



A small subsample of respondents, including Anissa, Tanaad and Waris, who currently held special employments, appeared to be more satisfied with their current life and employment situation in comparison to most of the other respondents. However, this subsample simultaneously possessed very weak language skills and were still positioned far away from unsubsidized labour market participation. And while expressing that they primarily needed more support for language acquisition, their current employment did not involve much exposure to the Swedish language or direct contact with the ethnic-majority population. Hence, while this form of employment can serve an important function by strengthening the confidence of women who lack formal education and professional experience, it also appears to run the risk of creating lock-in effects and delaying language acquisition. Such an outcome could be exemplified by the experience of Waris, who arrived in Sweden in 2007 and thus participated in the old, municipal introduction programme. She describes that she had imagined herself working and providing for herself in the new country, but despite having participated in several

language classes and employment preparation activities since then, her language skills are still very weak and she is dependent on financial support from the social services. Recently, Waris began working in a special employment, similar to that of Anissa, but still stresses that what she needs in order to approach the labour market is more support for learning the Swedish language.

5.2 Perceived devaluation of competence

A central pattern that emerged during the interviews with the veiled respondents who possessed both educational qualifications and professional experience, was a perceived devaluation of their competence due to stereotyping and prejudice, as illustrated in the story of Meryem.

Meryem

On paper, thirty-four-year-old Meryem probably had the strongest educational qualifications among all respondents. She was born in Syria, but has lived most of her life in Kuwait where she earned her Bachelor degree in English linguistics and worked as an elementary school teacher for eight years. Meryem arrived in Sweden in 2013, and after completing her Swedish language studies, she began to study for a Master in English linguistics at a Swedish university. After graduating in the summer of 2017, she has, without any luck, been applying for a variety of job openings. At the time of the interview, she is on parental leave with her infant baby, but is planning to resume her job-seeking within a couple of months' time.

Despite her academic credentials, professional experience and impeccable command of English, Meryem is expressing concerns about the future, as she perceives that the intersection of her gender and ethnicity leads people to assume that she cannot possess any valuable competences. In addition, she also feels that she has to face more "traditional" gender based prejudices regarding women's ability to combine motherhood and employment:

For us there are so many barriers, you know. For me as a woman, wearing a scarf, they would like, they have those stereotypical thoughts, that I cannot do much. And I still can see the "ah" in their faces when I speak, "*ah* you can speak", "*ah* you have studied." They felt that and I did not tell people at university that I have kids, because you know they will judge you "*ah* you have too many kids, like Arabs do" (...) They do not think, or they get so overwhelmed because how, how can you manage having kids and

studying? And I see it is something like ordinary, so many, I mean almost all my friends are the same. They have kids, they studied, they worked, yeah.

When asked the follow-up question of whether she believes stereotyping and prejudice is more problematic for immigrant women than for immigrant men in Sweden, Meryem also quickly replies:

Yeah, yeah yeah. I think so, definitively. Although they say that they are with the women, they are feminists and stuff, but they are not standing with the woman the way they should.



Meryem's story is not unique, as other veiled respondents who possessed both educational qualifications and professional experience also perceived that their competence and skill was not recognized due to stereotyping and prejudice. For example, Susana, a trained and former self-employed seamstress, describes how she felt distressed after visiting local clothing stores in order to find an internship position:

... Sometimes I came out crying. I felt that there are some people who, as soon as they see a woman wearing a scarf then it is no, no, they do not welcome us. (...) But I am free to choose whether to wear a scarf or not and I think that they in turn should respect that and not just look directly at it, because then they will see our experiences and competenc. Because the scarf is on my head, not inside my brain (...) I think that in time they will know and understand that it is not about that, that we wear the scarf does not mean that we are not competent. (*Susana, 57*)

Another example is Leah, who explains that she decided to remove the picture from her CV:

In the beginning, in my CV I had a picture of myself, so then me and my husband said that maybe it is because I am wearing the scarf , they do not want me, so I removed the picture. (*Leah, 34*)

Further, general concerns about stereotyping and prejudice also became evident as several respondents during the interviews explicitly distanced themselves from "other" immigrant women:

... So there are two types of women in Sweden. One who wants to change her life, who wants work and rebuild her life. And then there are women who want to keep on living their old life, to sit at home and do nothing. There are two kinds. I am this person who wants to find work and do something. (*Hawa, 40*)

...but some [women] do not want to do an internship, they want to have less SFI-hours and the rest are at home. But I, who was always wishing for someone to offer me an internship, I did not get one. (*Susana, 57*)

5.3. Perceived difficulties with “starting over”

To a greater or lesser extent, migration to Sweden necessarily involved a restart of life for all respondents. But the perceived difficulties associated with “starting over” appeared as more prominent among older respondents with many years of professional experience behind them, especially for those who lacked formal educational qualifications, as illustrated in the accounts of Hadeel and Dalal.

Hadeel

After having worked as a midwife for over two decades in Syria, fifty-two-year-old Hadeel possess a great deal of practical, professional experience. However, she has no higher educational qualifications and is therefore not eligible for practicing medical professions in Sweden. At the time of the interview, Hadeel has a part-time special employment where she mostly does cleaning work. She feels very unsatisfied with her current life and employment situation, especially as she finds not being able to practice her profession frustrating. Like many other respondents, she describes her inter-ethnic social capital as limited, and she is therefore largely dependent on the support from public officials at the PES and social services. Since her arrival in Sweden four years ago, she has been assigned a number of internships, but claims that none of them have been within her field of interest and that she was not given any influence over the content of her introduction plan. While being aware that midwife is a regulated profession in Sweden, Hadeel’s professional identity is important to her, and she still longs for an internship that gives her the opportunity to demonstrate her medical skills:

Maybe some women want to sew, maybe cook, serve food, it varies. I like working with my profession, do you understand?

I would like to be at a health center. Not here, here, here, here, different places. No, it is wrong, it is not right.

In addition to her lack of higher educational qualifications, Hadeel also perceives that her higher age impedes her language acquisition as many years have elapsed since last time she sat in the school bench. Consequently, she is still struggling with the Swedish language and does not feel motivated to study. In this manner, the intersection of class and age leaves her stuck in a position in which her practical skills cannot be utilized without additional education, while she simultaneously does not have the motivation to pursue any further studies. Therefore, Hadeel sounds discouraged when concluding:

Everything is just cleaning, cleaning. Just sitting here, studying, no no, Everything, everything, everything is wrong.

Dalal

Just like Hadeel, fifty-two-year-old Dalal lacks higher educational qualifications, but has many years of professional experience as a personal assistant. She is now divorced, but explains that the separation from her husband was a long, trying process, and during interview she often address and problematizes the situation for women in Syria, stressing how important it is for her to build a new and more independent life in Sweden. However, due to her lack of higher educational qualifications, gaining a stronger foothold on the Swedish labour market has not been easy. Since her arrival in Sweden six years ago, Dalal has been employed by the hour on a couple of short-term contracts, but she feels frustrated and stressed over the fact that has not been able to find any secure employment. As for Hadeel, learning the Swedish language has been difficult for her and while she mentions thoughts about finding a new profession in the future, her age still creates barriers for her motivation to enroll in further studies:

...But I am not young you know, like those who can think “ok I can study now and not work at all”, I cannot think like that... Everyone keeps telling me that I have to study, but I do not want to study now...I do not want to turn 60 and then find a job, a job after I have studied. That is not possible for me.

In addition, she is also doubting whether more education actually would be enough to compensate for her higher age – or her lack of driving skills:

... But everything they [employers] want, or not everything but 90 per cent, they want young people, between 25 and 40 years old, or people who have a driver's license, do you understand? There are some requirements and I do not, I feel inferior, inferior, inferior...



For older respondents with many years of professional experience behind them, including Hadeel, Dalal and Nour, the lack of higher educational qualifications became extra problematic, as many years had elapsed since their last days of schooling. This resulted in perceived difficulties and a lack of motivation for “starting over” an education in order to be able to practice their old profession, or to embark on a new career path:

...Coming here and starting from scratch, it is very tough. It is not the same as before, I am forty-six years old, it is not the same as when being twenty, nineteen, or eighteen years old... It is very tough. (...) I studied and worked and now starting from zero. It is very difficult. (*Nour, 46*)

Further, among the older respondents, age was also explicitly problematized in relation to language acquisition:

People my age, we do not think that it helps to just attend SFI in order to learn the language. If you can find an internship position then you can practice the language by doing the internship, then it will be a great support for...otherwise it does not help to just sit in the school bench to learn the language, it is not possible, it becomes very tough. (*Susana, 57*)

...[to learn] the language, very good. But very difficult, it is right that we should learn. But I am old, do you understand? (*Hadeel, 52*)

6. Concluding discussion

The most frequently occurring issue in the collected interview data was a perceived lack of institutional support after the introduction period. Although a number of respondents, five to be exact, were still registered in labour market programmes at the PES, they described it as very difficult to get in touch with their employment officers and to receive the help they needed.

Mahrooz and Fahira, who were currently under the auspices of social services, further perceived that this institution “only sends money”, without providing them any relevant support for approaching the labour market. Recalling the figures presented in the introductory section of this thesis, between 2013 and 2017 a yearly average of only 14 per cent of the female participants in the introduction programme had proceeded to employment after completing their introduction plan, in comparison to 32 per cent of the male participants (PES, annual reports 2013 - 2017). These figures, and the empirical findings of this study, indicates that a large share of refugee women are in need of continued support after the introduction period in order to be able to integrate on the Swedish labour market. Consequently, the perceived difficulties of accessing such support most likely constitutes a significant obstacle for labour market integration.

The intersectional approach further helped to illustrate how this perceived absence of institutional support became particularly evident and problematic as many respondents also expressed that they, apart from the PES and social services, had no other sources of guidance to turn to. This experienced lack of social capital, in turn, often stemmed from the autonomous and intersecting effects of gender and ethnicity. For example when recalling the accounts of Leah, who felt that she was not accepted by the ethnic majority population due to her scarf, Anissa, who explained that her intense schedule in combination with responsibilities for home and children left her without time or energy for any social activities, and Hawa, who perceived that traditional gender roles still affected and constrained her social interactions with the opposite sex:

We who come from a country that, there are not so many people that maybe.... Me as a woman do not meet men that often and work with them... So maybe I feel shy sometimes or something, yes. But it is not because I do not want to talk to them, but a little shy, yes, it is because of my traditions. (*Hawa, 40*)

As was illustrated in the literature review, a growing literature has demonstrated the value of informal contacts on the labour market and immigrant’s access to social and professional networks has consequently been put forward as an important facilitator for immigrant’s labour market integration (Åslund, Forslund and Liljeberg, 2017; OECD, 2016). What the findings of this study demonstrate is that for many respondents the importance of social capital appeared to stretch beyond being merely a valuable asset for finding employment, as it was also perceived as an important source of guidance and support during the integration process,

especially when the institutional support was perceived as insufficient. Additionally, even though a lack of inter-ethnic contacts was the most outspoken issue in relation to social capital, Anissa and Meryem, who had arrived with smaller children, also described that they were missing the support in child rearing that family and friends had provided in their source country.

Further, previous research has put forward host-country language proficiency as a strong determinant for immigrants' labour market integration (OECD, 2016; Chiswick and Miller, 2002) and some studies also indicate that language proficiency plays an even more important role for women's ability to enter the host country's labour market (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018). Among the respondents, language was certainly perceived as a major obstacle for accessing employment on the Swedish labour market, but was even more frequently brought up as a barrier for socially integrating with the ethnic-majority population. Several respondents also seemed to be trapped in what can be best described as a "catch 22"-situation, where they described their weak language skills as obstructing contacts with the ethnic majority population, while at the same time perceiving their lack of inter-ethnic contacts as delaying their language acquisition.

While most respondents explicitly problematized a perceived lack of sufficient institutional support, Anissa, Tanaad and Waris appeared more satisfied with the help they had received from the PES and social services, both during and after the introduction period. However, the analysis of their accounts still indicated the presence of institutional barriers, but in the form of a lack of access to relevant and forward-looking employment preparation activities. These women had arrived in Sweden without prior working experience and a short or no previous education, two of them being illiterates, but were currently enrolled in subsidized employments that did not seem to adequately support their language acquisition or aid them in developing a professional identity. Their situation confirms observations that have been made in previous evaluations of the introduction programme about the lack of access to relevant labour market efforts for low-educated women, and that only a very small share of women within this group receive any formal education once the introduction period has come to an end (OECD, 2016; Swedish National Audit Office, 2015; Wickström Östervall, 2017). Further, as their special employments primarily involved doing cleaning and needlework, it also confirms conclusions drawn from the committee report *The right to participate. Recently arrived women and family member immigrants in the labour market* (SOU 2012:69) about how newly arrived women in

general are consistently given less extensive and relevant support for labour market integration compared to their male counterparts, and that this partly is a consequence of gender-stereotyped preconceptions among public officials.

Besides hindrances on the institutional level, another central theme emerging from the interview accounts was a perceived devaluation of competence and skill due to stereotyping and prejudice. This was expressed by the veiled respondents Meryem and Leah, who possessed both educational qualifications and professional experience, but still experienced difficulties of establishing a lasting foothold on the Swedish labour market, and Susana, who was currently sick-listed but shared experiences of perceived prejudice when struggling to find an internship position on her own. While previous experimental studies have presented evidence of ethnic discrimination in recruitment processes in Sweden (e.g. Carlsson and Rooth, 2007; Bursell, 2014), Arai, Bursell and Nekby (2016) also found a “reverse gender gap” for individuals with Arabic names, as men proved to be more strongly discriminated against than women within this group. However, a number of critical researchers have illustrated how the intersection of gender and ethnicity has become an increasingly politicized topic across Europe and that the ideal of gender equality has come to be coupled with European national identities and values, subsequently leading to the stereotyping of immigrant women as helpless and passive “victims” of a patriarchal source country culture²¹. Consequently, perceived as well as actual prevalence of such stereotyping could certainly have an effect on refugee women’s labour market integration, and, as discussed above, gender-stereotyped preconceptions among public officials has also been put forward as an obstacle for newly arrived women’s integration on the Swedish labour market (SOU 2012:69). In addition, for Leah, Meryem and Hawa perceived prejudice was also problematized from a social capital perspective, as they felt that the intersection of their gender and ethnicity constituted barriers for establishing contacts with the ethnic majority population.

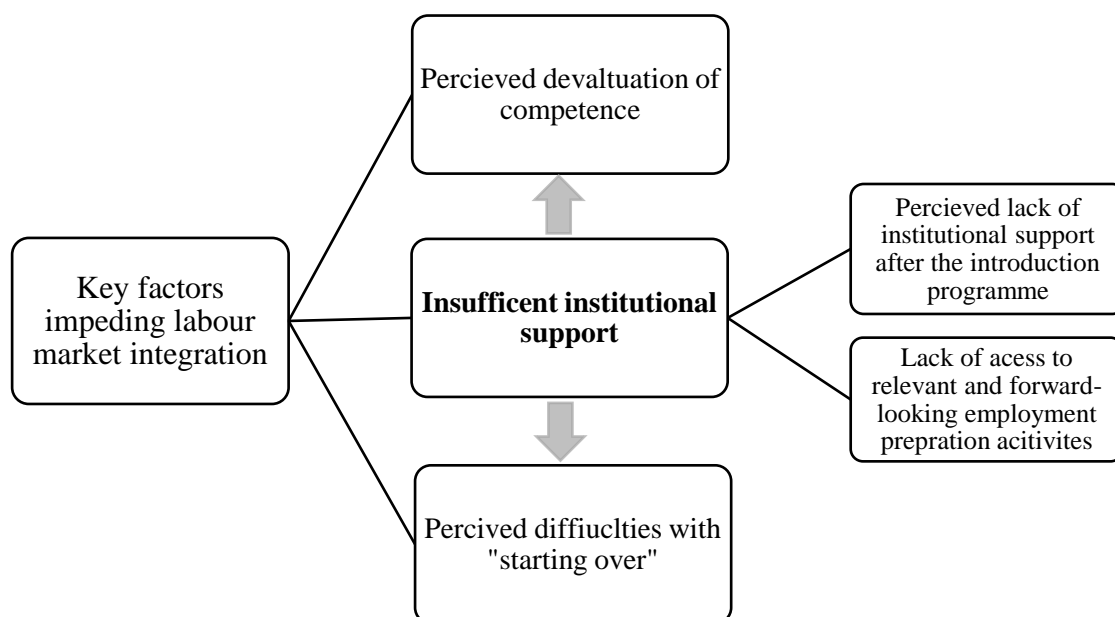
As the sample in this study included a number of older respondents, the intersectional analysis also revealed how age impeded the labour market integration process through perceived difficulties with “starting over”, both with language studies and education in general. This became especially prominent for Hadeel and Dalal, who lacked higher educational qualifications but had many years of professional experience behind them. Even though the vast majority of refugee women are under the age of 39 upon arrival in Sweden, it is nonetheless

²¹ See for example Roggeband and Verloo, 2007; Borchorst and Teigen, 2010; Ghorashi, 2010.

important to acknowledge the situation for older women as well, especially as employment rates for newly arrived women begin to clearly decrease already at the age of 45 (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018) . For Hadeel, Dalal and Rana, their older age in combination with what they perceived as a lack of sufficient institutional support and social capital, created obstacles for their labour market participation, even though they had many years of professional experience behind them – and potentially many active working years left ahead of them.

Lastly, one important aspect that could be detected by focusing on the voices of refugee women themselves, was also how different respondents perceived and related to various labour market barriers. In general, the most resourceful respondents, in terms of educational qualifications, professional experience and Swedish proficiency, expressed the greatest concerns about the future. Perceived devaluation of competence, language deficiencies and lack of Swedish-born contacts was put forward as difficult obstacles for their labour market integration. Simultaneously, a couple respondents on the other side of the spectra, who lacked both educational qualifications and professional experience, seemed confident and assured that they would be able find work just as soon as they could master the Swedish language. This implies that in some cases certain labour market barriers may be, at least partly, self-imposed or exacerbated due to individual perceptions about their magnitude²².

Figure 4. Summary of findings.



²² For a further discussion on self-imposed labour market barriers, see Ratkovic 2013.

Returning to the explorative research question presented in section 1.1: *What can refugee women's accounts of their labour market integration process tell us about the key factors impeding a successful labour market integration?* Based on the interview accounts collected and analyzed in this study, the answer would be that ***insufficient institutional support***, in particular after the introduction period, appeared as the single most significant key factor impeding a successful labour market integration. Furthermore, ***perceived devaluation of competence*** and ***perceived difficulties with "starting over"*** were also identified as key factors. However, as illustrated by the grey arrows in figure 5, insufficient institutional support appeared to have a strong amplifying effect on these additional key factors. Recalling for example the account of Meryem. She perceived a devaluation of competence due to stereotyping and prejudice as the most difficult hindrance for her labour market integration, but simultaneously described that the PES had not provided any guidance and support in her job-seeking, as they assumed she would manage on her own thanks to her strong CV and educational qualifications. Or the story of Hadeel, who due to her higher age perceived it as too difficult to "start over" with an education, but simultaneously expressed frustration about having been assigned various internships positions, and most recently a special employment, that did not correspond to her job preferences and professional experience.

The collected interview accounts further helped demonstrate how gender in different ways had shaped the respondents' labour market integration process. Most significantly, gender had an impact for the six respondents who due to traditional gender roles had never engaged in paid work before. In addition to not having any professional experience, these women also lacked a professional identity, and due to the identified lack of access to relevant and forward-looking employment preparation activities, it seemed as though the institutional support could not adequately aid them in developing one. But the intersectional approach also illustrated how gender often appeared to affect the process of labour market integration in more subtle and indirect manners – through not being able to apply for jobs because of lacking a driving license, feeling involuntary constrained in social interactions with the ethnic-majority population, or abstaining from mentioning one's children to fellow students to avoid the risk of stereotyping and prejudice. Based on the findings of this study, it can therefore be argued that gender *always matter*. However, assuming that cultural values generally make refugee women less willing to participate on the host country's labour market appears to be an oversimplified explanation for the low employment rate of this group. By focusing on the experiences of refugee women who expressed a positive attitude and strong willingness to work, this study instead displayed how

a perceived and actual lack of sufficient institutional support obstructed the labour market integration for many respondents – regardless of whether they had many years of professional experience behind them, or had never considered engaging in paid work before arriving in Sweden.

7. Policy implications and directions for future research

First and foremost, although the aim of this study has been to generate new insights about the key underlying causes that impedes refugee women's labour market integration, it should be acknowledged that the intersectional approach quite conversely helped to illustrate the difficulties associated with making broad generalizations concerning such a diversified population. While some respondents found it difficult to imagine a future profession as they had never engaged in paid labour before, others were struggling hard to hold on their professional identity when practical experiences could not be utilized due to a lack of educational qualifications, or when they perceived that their competence was devalued due to stereotyping and prejudice. Whereas one respondent felt very satisfied with her part-time subsidized employment, another one expressed frustration over being trapped in the same as she perceived her working task as corresponding poorly to her previous experiences. And while some explicitly criticized and tried to break free from old gender roles, others still carried the main responsibility for home and children.

Still, using the voices of refugee women as the primary source of data did make it possible to discern a number of key factors that appeared to impede a successful integration on the Swedish labour market, the most central one being insufficient institutional support. And while obstacles on the individual level, such as a short educational background or lack of access to social and professional networks, do have a negative impact on the probability of finding employment, based on the findings of this study it could be argued that a more well-developed and customized institutional support, which recognizes that refugee women is far from a homogenous group, is crucial in order to help overcome such individual barriers and improve the prospects for labour market integration. For example, this could include providing refugee women with a short previous education and lack of working experience an early study and career guidance in their native language, in order to ensure the access to relevant and forward-looking employment preparation activities both during and after the introduction period. For the highly-educated refugee women, a wise investment could be to provide more opportunities

for this group to meet with potential employers during their time in the introduction programme, in order to expand their professional network and create more routes into the Swedish labour market once the introduction period has come to an end.

While much effort, from both a scholarly and policy perspective, has been invested in developing, evaluating and examining the design and functioning of comprehensive introduction programmes for newly arrived immigrants, this study has highlighted the need for future research to also dig deeper into what happens *after* this introduction period has come to an end. How well equipped are institutions such as the PES and social services to address the needs of refugee women who have finished and left the introduction programme, but that are still in need of support for approaching the labour market? And what factors may lead some of these women to completely withdraw from the labour force once the introduction is “completed”? No matter how ambitious and financially well-supported, introduction programmes nonetheless have an upper time limit and a lot of resources - both in terms of government spending and individual effort on the side of refugee women themselves – runs the risk of going to waste unless efforts are also made to ensure continuous and adequate institutional support for the majority of refugee women that are not able to proceed directly to employment after the introduction period.

Another theme emerging from the empirical analysis of this study that I would encourage future research to look deeper into is the potential effect of individual perceptions concerning the magnitude of labour market barriers, and to what extent certain barriers might be, at least partly, self-imposed. Further, it would also be interesting to find out more about the importance and use of personal networks during the labour market integration process from a gender perspective, as this in various ways appeared to be an important issue for the respondents in this study.

Lastly, I would like to conclude by encouraging more scholars to use the voices of refugee women as a source of data. As this study solely focused on the experiences of refugee women in the Swedish context, it would be interesting to also see comparative case studies assessing the functioning of national policies and programmes for labour market integration from the perspective of refugee women themselves.

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Appendix A. Respondent demographics

Name*	Country of birth	Age	Years in Sweden	Marital status	Number of Children	Educational level/years of schooling	Working experience	Labour market status
Anissa	Somalía	46	3	Married	8	None (illiterate)	None	Special employment (part-time)
Bilan	Somalia	39	5	Married	3	6 years	Kindergarten teacher, store clerk, career for the elderly	Unemployed
Dalal	Syria	52	6	Divorced	2	Upper secondary school	Personal assistant	Unemployed
Elena	Syria	46	3	Divorced	4	Upper secondary school	None	Introduction programme
Fariha	Afghanistan	42	7	Married	2	8 years	None	Outside the labour force
Hadeel	Syria	52	4	Divorced	1	9 years	Midwife	Special employment (part-time)
Hawa	Palestine	40	3	Widow	5	Bachelor degree	Elementary and UNRWA school teacher	Employed by the hour
Leah	Syria	34	4	Married	2	Master's degree	High school and university teacher/lecturer	Employed by the hour
Mahrooz	Afghanistan	44	5	Married	3	None (illiterate)	None	Outside the labour force
Meryem	Syria	34	5	Married	4	Master's degree	Elementary school teacher	Parental leave (unemployed)
Nour	Syria	46	3	Married	3	9 years	Hairdresser, seamstress	Special employment (part-time)
Rana	Syria	52	4	Single	0	Upper secondary school	Salesman	Unemployed
Susana	Syria	57	4	Widow	2	Liberal adult education (Folkhögskola)	Self-employed seamstress, driver	Sick-leave (no previous employment in Sweden)
Tanaad	Somalia	41	6	Married	0	6 years	None	Special employment (part-time)
Waris	Somalia	39	11	Married	0	None (illiterate)	None	Special employment (part-time)
Yana	Syria	43	4	Married	4	Bachelor degree	Elementary school teacher	Employed by the hour

* To ensure their anonymity, all respondents were given pseudonyms.

Appendix B. Interview guide

Introduction

Information about the purpose of the study and setup of the interview; recording, anonymity and confidentiality, how the material will be used, the right to decline answering questions and to withdraw participation, the different themes that will be covered during the interview etc.

Opening questions

- Can you tell me a little about who you are? (Age, year of arrival in Sweden, family situation etc.)
- What does a usual day look like in your life look like today?

Theme 1. Source country experiences and migration to Sweden

- Can you tell me a little bit about your life in (...) before you came to Sweden? What did a usual day look like?
- Did you study? For how many years?
- Were you participating on the labour market in (...), working outside of your home?

If yes:

- What did you work with?
- Can you remember what is was that made you choose that profession?
- Did you feel like your profession was an important part of your life, of who you were/are?

If no:

- Do you feel that you made an active decision not to work, or was it something that was expected of you/felt natural to you?
- Can you tell me a little bit more about your thoughts about engaging in paid work?
- When you were living in (...) did you ever think about what you would have liked to work with? Maybe some specific job/profession that you think would have suited you?

- When you first arrived in Sweden, can you remember any thoughts/visions that you had about what your life would look like here?
- Did you imagine yourself working in the future? Studying? Did you feel that it was important for you to find employment?
- Can you describe how your life today, in Sweden, differ from what your life looked like in (...)?

Theme 2. The Swedish Introduction programme

- Can you tell me a little about your experiences of the Swedish introduction programme?
 - When you first came to the PES, can you recall what you hoped/excepted that your participation in the introduction programme would lead to?
 - Did you receive a personal introduction plan? If so, can you describe what activities it contained?
 - Were you able to participate full-time in the introduction activities (during two years)?
 - Did you feel motivated to participate in the activities of the plan?
 - In your encounters with the PES, did you feel that was it easy/hard for you to “translate” and demonstrate/express your competences and experiences from (...)?
 - How did you feel after completing the introduction plan, when you were “done” with the introduction programme? Did you know how to move forward? Did you feel you had the possibility to choose what the next step would be (e.g. in relation to work/education)?
 - Was there someone outside of the PES and social services that you could turn to for support and advice during and after your time in the introduction programme? (For example Swedish-born friends or contacts)

Theme 3. Experiences of job-searching

- If you are looking for work today, can you tell me about your experiences of job-searching in Sweden?
 - Can you give some examples of where you have found jobs to apply for (friends, the PES, etc.?). Has anyone supported you in finding/applying for work?

- Do you feel that it is possible for you to apply for a variety of jobs, or just a few within a specific branch?
- Can you think of any specific reason for not being called to interviews or offered some of the jobs you've applied for?
- If you are not looking for work today, can you describe what the reasons for that might be?
- Have you previously applied for work in Sweden? If yes, could you tell me about your experience of job-searching and what it was that made you stop searching for jobs?

Theme 4. Thoughts about the future

- How do you look at the future? Can you describe how you picture your future life in Sweden?
- Do you feel worried/anxious about the future? Can you explain what it is that makes you feel worried/anxious?
- Could you describe your thoughts about participating in the Swedish labour market in the future? Can you think of any obstacles for labour market participation that you feel are difficult to overcome?
- What kind of support do you think you would need in order to approach the labour market/find work? Or what do you think would make you feel more motivated towards applying for jobs?

Closing question:

- That was all the questions that I wanted to ask. Is there anything else you would like to add or ask me about?